CRUCIFIED
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Psalm 24
Matthew 21:1–11
Matthew 27:32–37

Despite our earnest efforts, we couldn't climb all the way up to God.
So what does God do? In an amazing act of condescension,
on Good Friday, God climbs down to us, becomes one with us.
The story of divine condescension begins on Christmas
and ends on Good Friday. We thought, if there is to be business
between us and God, we must somehow get up to God.
Then God came down to the level of the cross,
all the way down to the depths of hell.
God still stoops, in your life and mine.
Condescends.

William H. Willimon
Thank God It's Friday

Startle us, O God, with the story of what happened this day:
a king coming in humility and vulnerability and peace.
Startle us with the audacity of a religion based on that peace.
Startle us with a love that comes all the way down to our city,
our lives, and bids us follow. Amen.

Every preacher has a favorite Palm Sunday story. There is so much to work with: Children in the chancel waving palm branches at their beaming parents. The little boy who found himself directly behind the lectern and couldn't see his parents—or anything other than the microphone—and discovered that if he hit the microphone with his palm branch, it made a sound like a small mortar explosion, and he continued to do it in time to "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," until one of the ministers more or less wrestled him and finally wrenched the branch from his tightly clenched fist. My all-time favorite, which I try not to tell more than once every few years, comes from the days when our children paraded around the block before entering the sanctuary, waving branches, and shouting "Hosanna," a practice discontinued mercifully after a particularly bitter cold day with gale force winds. One of the little boys, one year—now a fine young man—got into the spirit by singing, "O Hosanna, don't you cry for me. I'm going to Louisiana

with a banjo on my knee." I simply cannot think of this day or hear the triumphant shouts without remembering "O Hosanna!"

A friend, Dave Davis, pastor of Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, remembers the "Grab-and-Go Palms." Dave was standing in the doorway of the church, shaking hands and saying good-bye to the last lingering Palm Sunday worshipers. Nassau Church sits in the middle of Princeton, on the main street. A car stopped at the red light in front of the church, a young woman jumped out of the passenger seat, sprinted up the steps, and said, breathlessly, "Father, can I get some palms? We just have to have them every year." So Dave handed her the last few wilted leftovers. She grabbed them and rushed back to the car with her palm fronds in hand. "I don't think they even missed the green light," Dave says (*A Gospel You Can Taste*).

"Grab-and-Go Palm Fronds": a metaphor perhaps. Certainly it is a day of ambiguity and deep irony: the parade itself, a moment of triumph and celebration that we remember so joyfully with our own children's procession, is only part of the story. It is a day of irony: celebration, indeed, but also betrayal, denial, and five days later an execution. There is a famous painting of the crucifixion by the Italian artist Jacobo Tintoretto. It's in a church in Venice: some consider it the greatest painting in the world. It's huge, and the artist painted in a lot of ordinary people going about their daily business—buying, selling, shopping, a cobbler repairing shoes, children playing, dogs and cats—and over in the corner, a donkey, perhaps the very one the crucified, dying Christ rode so triumphantly five days before, is eating a palm frond.

Be careful, the artist is saying, in the way you observe this day. Don't oversimplify. It was a day of joyful triumph when the children sang and crowds of pilgrims welcomed Jesus to the city by stripping the cloaks from their backs and the limbs from the trees and strewing them in his path. And it is the occasion that starts a process of political and religious intrigue that will culminate in his execution five days later.

It begins, of course, with his decision to come to Jerusalem for the Passover. He and his friends are from Galilee, a region of rolling hills and small fishing villages clustered around the Sea of Galilee, an inland lake, 110 miles north of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the capital city: the city of David, the site of the temple, first built by Solomon. At Passover, the celebration of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery centuries before, the city is packed with religious pilgrims, some say as many as a million. They are there to go to the temple and make a sacrifice and to remember and celebrate their nation's remarkable freedom and autonomy, which, of course, at the moment no longer exist.

Israel is, in fact, no longer free or autonomous, a Roman province, governed by Rome and its representative, Pontius Pilate. So in addition to a happy, noisy occasion, it is a very volatile time, with patriotism and nationalism and resentment of the Romans—bordering on hatred—at a fever pitch. And so with good reason Jesus' friends object when he tells them he's going to Jerusalem. We still do, by the way, become uncomfortable, frightened, when he comes too close to the center of life—economics, politics, social policy—and starts to meddle. "Religion and politics don't mix," we continue to say in spite of the way he forced them to mix by riding into the capital.

When they are close to the city, he does something highly unusual: asks his disciples to bring a donkey so that he can ride into the city. He knows, they know, what that means. Everyone knew the promise of the prophet Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you: humble and lowly, riding on a donkey, and a colt, the foal of a donkey." Matthew is so intent that his readers make the connection that he has Jesus ordering two animals and riding on both of them, which is not possible. But he wants us to understand what this act means and what it evokes. "It's the Messiah, the King of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth is coming right out and claiming to be what some were whispering about him. He's here. The Son of God. The Savior." And so the crowd goes wild, shouting, singing, waving branches. "This could be it. The king is coming. The day of our salvation, our liberation, is at hand."

That's all it takes for the authorities to get their heads together and decide to cut this thing off before it gets out of hand. And that is what they do: have him arrested, tried, brought to Pontius Pilate, who, after washing his hands of the whole unpleasant business, orders him to be executed.

It's Friday noon now. The cheering crowds are gone. Judas has betrayed him; Peter has denied even knowing him; James and John and Peter have monumentally disappointed him by falling asleep while he prayed and asked God to rescue him. Another crowd has screamed for his execution; the soldiers have tormented and tortured him for their own amusement; his friends, all of them except the women, have fled in terror lest they are swept into the vortex of this tragedy. He's alone now, walking through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying his heavy cross, stumbling, falling, the soldiers prodding, pushing him along.

The more I read this familiar story, the more convinced I am that Jesus is in charge. From the moment he decides to go to Jerusalem, through his trial and torment, right up to his dying breath, he's the one responsible; he's driving it. Of course he was an innocent victim of a very human plot to preserve the privilege and authority of the powerful. But it is so much more than that. There is so much more going on here than an innocent victim executed. Jesus—not the religious officials, not the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, not the soldiers—Jesus is in charge.

Rome reserved crucifixion for special cases: runaway slaves, insurrectionists, revolutionaries, disturbers of the Pax Romana. In their fine book *The Last Days*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan call crucifixion "imperial terrorism," an act of "calculated social deterrence," the most cruel act in a cruel age, a public demonstration done as a warning. We seem to think it's okay for the state to kill people as long as we don't have to watch. The Romans did it as visibly and publicly as possible. Golgotha, Calvary, was the execution site for the capital city, Borg and Crossan say. The uprights of the crosses were permanently in place, embedded in the rock. This, the Romans said, is what happens to insurrectionists, troublemakers. To punctuate their contempt, the Romans put a sign over Jesus' head: "The King of the Jews." It was a final insult to him but also to the people of Israel. This is the only king you'll ever see so long as we're around, Rome was saying. This weak, helpless, dying peasant, bleeding to death, suffocating.

It wasn't very long however, until the cross became for some people not only an ugly symbol of Roman cruelty, but, of all things, a symbol of God's love.

What happened on the cross when Jesus was crucified? "Jesus died for our sins, the sins of the world," we say and have been taught. It's in our liturgies and literature and music. It is a way to explain what happened in the crucifixion of Jesus. It was first articulated by Anselm, an eleventh-century theologian. Anselm said, God is a just God. Human beings are sinners, an offense to God's justice. There must be punishment. God's justice must be satisfied. But because God is also love, God provides a substitute, God's own Son, who will receive the punishment we deserve. That's classic atonement theology. And while there is truth in it, some find it not quite satisfying. It seems to make God into an angry, rigid judge who must be appeased. Whereas the Bible and Jesus himself talk about a God who is love, a God whose justice is always tempered by love, a God who is more like a parent, a God whose dealing with wayward children is more like a loving mother or father.

Jesus died, Borg and Crossan say, not so much for the sins of the world as because of the sins of human beings. And his cross is, among its many meanings, the symbol of holy love. We search for the right words. William Willimon: "Christians believe that when we look at Jesus on the cross, we are privileged to see as much of God as we ever hope to see. The cross is not simply the truth about the human condition, it is the truth about God" (*Thank God It's Friday*, p. 89).

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams: "Jesus has plumbed the depths of human experience, including the terrible sense of abandonment by God

that he endured on the cross. With his cry from the cross, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' he has traveled to the outermost limits of what our sin and untruthfulness produce—to the edges of hell" (*Tokens of Trust*, pp. 8, 9).

And Garry Wills is very helpful in *What Jesus Meant,* when Wills says, in light of the classic notion that Jesus had to die to pay God for our sins, an alternative—a biblical alternative—is St. Paul's "like the father of the prodigal, who rushes to embrace, or like the good shepherd who searches out his lost sheep . . . this God does not sit on a throne waiting to receive their sacrificial offerings to him. . . . he comes after them."

That is what I believe and what moves me so deeply. The cross is not only a symbol of human sin and evil and compromise; it is supremely a symbol of God's love come all the way down to us, to live our life, to suffer as we do, to struggle and doubt and wonder where in the world God is in all of this, and to die our death.

Garry Wills put it beautifully: "Perhaps [the cross] is God's way of saying that no matter the horrors we face or hells we descend to, he is coming with us."

Wills illustrates with a homey little story. His young son woke up with a violent nightmare one night. When Wills asked him what was troubling him, he said that the nun in his school had told the children that they'd end up in hell if they sinned. "He asked me 'Am I going to hell?' There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature," Wills says, "but I instantly answered what any father would: 'All I can say is that if you're going there, I'm going with you.' If I felt that way about my son, God obviously loves him more than I do."

That is the central affirmation of Christianity. God, the almighty creator of the universe, is a God of love, who lays aside almightiness to come to us, to be with us, to be one of us. There is nothing quite like that in the whole history of human religion: a God who takes on humanness, human frailty and vulnerability, a God who goes all the way to show God's love—all the way to the valley of the shadow of death—a God who dies our death.

It is one of the great ironies that in spite of the centrality of that, we have an aversion to the cross. In some of the most successful, fastest growing megachurches in America, there are no crosses. The cross doesn't sell, Will Willimon says, except as an item of gold jewelry. What sells is success, personal empowerment, strength, winning. No crosses, please.

On the other hand, people who are suffering understand the cross and hold it tightly. Lying in a hospital bed with severe illness and a not-very-encouraging prognosis—you don't need a theologian to explain the cross; you hold onto it. In a dark cell, a political prisoner in a police state—you

knows what the cross means. And facing a personal valley of the shadow of death—you gratefully stand beneath the cross of Jesus.

No one ever said it more beautifully than Barbara Brown Taylor:

> To step into the darkness without understanding what it is all about, we may not go bravely or wisely. Some of us may have to crawl, and others of us to be carried, but that we can go at all has everything to do with the cross and the one who dares us to believe that God is at the bottom of everything, especially the things we cannot understand, with strong arms to catch us when we fall, when the net breaks, with loving arms to catch us when our dying is done. (*God in Pain*, p. 94)

The great theologian Karl Barth was once asked what the primary job of the preacher is. He thought for a moment and said, “Like John the Baptist, to point a finger toward the cross of Jesus.”

And so like preachers everywhere, I read everything I can about what the great thinkers have said, and I read and read and at some point must stop and confess and point to Jesus on the cross.

And when words and ideas have reached their limit, turn to art: Tintoretto with his magnificent canvas full of ordinary people, so like you and me, going about our business—a donkey over in a corner eating a Palm Sunday palm branch—and in the midst of it all, a dying man, still in charge, the King, the Savior of the world, the very love of God.

Or turn to music: Mozart’s *Requiem*, J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, or the great old hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”:

> Were the whole realm of nature mine,
> That were a present far too small;
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.